

# Rereading al-Ṭabarī through al-Māturīdī: New Light on the Third Century Hijrī

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Now that we have three editions of Abū Maṣṣūr Muḥammad al-Māturīdī's (d. 333/944) massive Qur'an commentary,\* *Ta'wīlāt al-Qur'ān*, we have no excuse for not consulting it.<sup>1</sup> The rapid successive appearance of three editions is an embarrassment of riches for the field—only Abū Ja'far Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī's (d. 310/923) *Tafsīr* has been edited this many times. The scholarship on al-Māturīdī has thus far been justifiably centered on his theological contributions.<sup>2</sup> Even when his Qur'an commentary was consulted, it was invariably approached primarily as a source for new theological views and material.<sup>3</sup> Incredibly, and despite being mentioned in its annals, al-Māturīdī does not play a significant role in the presentation of histories of *tafsīr*. He is passed over, and the little there is to say about him is taken as inconsequential to the framing of the history of the genre. The issue at hand following these multiple editions of his exegesis, thus, is not merely a matter of inspecting yet another Qur'an commentary, in a welcoming gesture to a work recently added to the constellation of available texts. Rather, as will become apparent in this article, we have in the *Tafsīr* of al-Māturīdī a fundamental early work that will revolutionise how we understand the development of the genre of *tafsīr* in medieval Islam. Recognising the central significance of the *Ta'wīlāt* will allow us to incorporate it as a major source alongside al-Ṭabarī, and will have profound implications for how we have been studying al-Ṭabarī and *tafsīr* as a whole. It would appear counterintuitive that the present article about al-Ṭabarī should have another commentator at its heart.<sup>4</sup> Yet I am arguing that, given the magnitude of al-Ṭabarī's achievement, the deluge of text that he has long engulfed us in, it is fruitful to read him alongside one of his near contemporaries. We are now able to look beyond what al-Ṭabarī collected, and to contextualise his work in ways that were previously impossible.

The *Taʾwīlāt ahl al-Sunna*, as al-Māturīdī's Qur'an commentary is otherwise known, is as old as al-Ṭabarī's and as voluminous (if not more so), and is therefore as significant a witness to the development of early Sunnī *tafsīr*. In fact, it might actually reflect an older phase, one unconcerned with authoritative tagging as the marker of Sunnī hermeneutical authority. The sources used by al-Māturīdī intersect with those used by al-Ṭabarī, clearly showing a common pool of interpretive knowledge, but al-Māturīdī also had unique sources that he drew upon (especially for the Muʿtazilī material). This is an unprecedented situation for the field: we have here two of the earliest Qur'an commentaries, both of the encyclopaedic type, each independent of the other, and each coming from a different geographical area.

This article, moreover, is about the role of al-Ṭabarī in our scholarship. We live in the shadow of his massive Qur'an commentary; it continues to be the major source in the construction and presentation of what early *tafsīr* was. We have as of yet not managed to assess him from outside of the confines of his own self-presentation. That is, he has long been both the one presenting us with the material and the one we are trying to assess. Furthermore, his mode of interpretation now represents the Sunnī hermeneutics of classical Islam: al-Ṭabarī is taken as the normative expression of the tradition, which leaves us with the impression that *ahl al-ḥadīth* were the major voice in this hermeneutical edifice. This understanding of early Sunnī hermeneutics, so widespread today, has obscured a more entrenched hermeneutical practice among the Sunnīs, one that was not only in dialogue with other sects (especially the Muʿtazila) but was also keenly aware of Arabic philology and its dictates and of rational arguments and their cogency. Later Sunnī rationalist hermeneutics were not an aberration but a continuation of a very old current in Sunnī Islam. Instead of presenting al-Ṭabarī as one voice among many, he has come to be the representative voice of medieval Sunnī hermeneutics, with the concomitant result that Sunnī hermeneutics is presented as homogenous, fully articulated, and internally uncontested. It is as if the Sunnīs spoke the same language from Andalusia to the Indus. Yet Sunnī hermeneutics was being defined precisely through such contestations, from which perspective what al-Ṭabarī constructed was no more orthodox than what al-Māturīdī presented. To reread al-Ṭabarī, however, one has to read al-Māturīdī alongside.

### The Case of Q. 67:5

I begin by comparing the approach of the two exegetes to a particular verse, Q. 67:5, *We have adorned the lowest heaven with lamps and made them missiles for stoning devils. We have prepared the torment of a blazing fire for them.*<sup>5</sup> In explicating the details of their approach I show how each belonged to an already established Sunnī hermeneutics, coexisting and (more importantly) in vehement opposition to each other.

In his interpretation of the phrase *We have adorned the nearest heaven with lamps* (*maṣābīḥ*), al-Ṭabarī states that the lamps in this verse are the stars, and then he cites an interpretation by Qatāda:<sup>6</sup>

God has created these stars for three purposes: as an adornment for the heavens [paraphrasing Q. 37:6], as missiles against the devils [who fly to heaven to eavesdrop on the orders of heaven, per this verse], and as signs to be guided by [at night or at sea, echoing Q. 16:6].

This is a rather straightforward and unproblematic interpretation, especially as it is based on other Qur'anic verses. It is the concluding sentence that is interesting. Al-Ṭabarī states:<sup>7</sup>

As for the one who interprets it (*yata'awwalu minhā*) other than that (*ghayr dhālik*)—that one has opined from his own opinion (*fa-qad qāla bi-ra'yihī*) and committed a mistake (*wa-akhṭa'a ḥaṣṣuḥu*) and lost his share (*wa-aḏā'a naṣībahu*) and pretended to know that which he has no knowledge of (*wa-takallaḥa mā lā 'ilm lahu bihī*).

This is a rather vociferous condemnation of an interpretation that al-Ṭabarī does not report or even hint at. Given how innocuous this verse seems, nothing much appears to be at stake, so one is eager to see what it was that led al-Ṭabarī off on such a tirade. In scouring the available *tafsīr* literature, we find our answer in the Qur'an commentary of al-Māturīdī, the only exegete who supplies us with the material that lies at the heart of al-Ṭabarī's discomfort.

What does al-Māturīdī have to say about Q. 67:5? A few general remarks about the respective *tafsīr* works of al-Ṭabarī and al-Māturīdī are in order. The first issue I want to highlight, as I will be comparing their interpretations of (among others) Q. 67, is that al-Māturīdī's Qur'an commentary does not have *isnāds*, that is, the chains of names of authorities that were extensively supplied by his contemporary al-Ṭabarī before every interpretive tradition or opinion. Given how much space this material takes up in al-Ṭabarī, we can safely assume that the relative volume of both Qur'an commentaries is similar, and indeed there seem to be instances where al-Māturīdī is far more comprehensive. This is true in the case of Q. 67, where the interpretation provided by al-Ṭabarī for this sura is thirteen pages long in the al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī edition; if we remove the *isnāds*, then we end up with three or four pages at most. By contrast, al-Māturīdī's discussion of this sura occupies 43 pages without *isnāds* (or 33 pages in the Beirut edition). It encompasses nearly all the material provided by al-Ṭabarī, and offers much more besides. The fruits of this contrast are unthinkable according to the conventional view of al-Ṭabarī as the master-encyclopaedist of the tradition. Comparing the material makes it clear that al-Māturīdī has access to the same exegetical corpus available to al-Ṭabarī, and that in many cases they both seem

to be aware even of material not cited by the other. There was a shared exegetical corpus that specialists in *tafsīr* seem to have had available to them, far more extensive than what any single exegete has preserved for us. The third-century Hijrī material is evidently massive, even restricting the scope to Sunnī sources. If we presume that there was as much Muʿtazilī exegetical material, we can start to appreciate how few of this century's texts have survived.

The other point that I want to highlight here is that al-Māturīdī's voice and views are at the centre of his work. As mentioned above, his Qur'an commentary does not include *isnāds*; he does cite authorities, but his own opinions and interpretations are usually given as authoritative, and self-evidently so; they stand at the centre of how he constructs his work. He does not seem to think that his only job is to collect and then evaluate various inherited materials, that is, to act as a judge and arbitrator rather than a commentator and interpreter. Al-Māturīdī quotes the various authorities we expect (and many others), and he also gives many interpretations by authorities he does not name. He speaks of and refers to a community of exegetes (*ahl al-ta'wīl*) whose activities are not merely of past generations, but are rather of a scholarly community whose opinions on the meaning of the Qur'an he can quote and dispute. More intriguingly, al-Māturīdī goes beyond the names of recognised Sunnī authorities found in al-Ṭabarī. He places material from the Muʿtazilī tradition close at hand, whether doing so to side with it or to refute it.

Al-Māturīdī gives a brief discussion of which heaven is meant by Q. 67:5, and explains that the lamps are the stars. He continues his commentary on this verse, saying:<sup>8</sup>

... and He (God) reminded His creatures of the magnitude of the beneficence (*naʿīm*) He granted to them in the creation of the stars. Through the stars, He bestowed three kinds of benefits: first, He made them an enjoyment for the onlookers, as He said in *Sūrat al-Ḥijr* [Q. 15:16, *We have set constellations up in the sky and made it beautiful for all to see*], and moreover, this adornment (*zīna*) appears when the adornment of the earth disappears at night. Thus He replaces the adornment of the earth with the adornment of the heavens. What is superior about this adornment is that adornment is usually not experienced unless one approaches the object of beauty, but this heavenly adornment shines from afar; as such, it is far superior to the adornment of earth. The second benefit can be deduced from the verse, *He is the one who created the stars, that you might be guided by them in the darkness of the wilderness and in the seas* [Q. 6:97]. Thus, He made the stars guidance in the event that we get lost, that we may be saved from perdition. The third benefit is that which He mentioned in

this very verse—that these stars are missiles against the devils, and [that by preventing the devils from eavesdropping on heavens, the stars] alleviate the fate of humans by allowing them to avoid dark deeds and act with the presence of light.

Al-Māturīdī then narrates the story of how the devils were always attempting to eavesdrop on the workings of the heavens to know the future in order to confound human beings, and how the meteorites burn them and save humanity from confusion.

Despite the fact that there is almost complete overlap in the above interpretations with those of Qatāda, there is no mention here of the view attributed to Qatāda that is quoted by al-Ṭabarī; moreover, the specific language used suggests that the three benefits of the stars were independently deduced from separate Qur'anic verses for the two accounts.<sup>9</sup> Given the fact that al-Māturīdī would have known of Qatāda's statement, we can presume that he felt no need to support his own statement by quoting an authoritative source. In his view, either his reasoned interpretation is sufficient, or (as is more likely) he was summarising the given exegetical traditions on this verse. Sunnī *tafsīr*, as it appears in al-Māturīdī, is discursive, deductive, and not concerned with names as markers of authority. The exegete is at the forefront, just as in the commentary of Muqātil b. Sulaymān or any early commentary that survived. *Isnāds* were neither necessary nor the source of authority. On the rare occasion that al-Māturīdī disputes the authenticity of a tradition, he uses the notion of the consensus of the community to undermine it (see below for an example).

There is, however, another interpretation for this verse cited by al-Māturīdī. He states:<sup>10</sup>

By calling the stars an adornment of the heavens, we can deduce another meaning: that is, the inhabitants of the heavens themselves are to be put to the test to see which of them is the best in deeds, exactly as the inhabitants of earth were put to test by these very adornments, for don't you see that God has said in *Sūrat al-Kahf* [Q. 18:7], *We have made what is on earth an adornment for them, that they be tested which of them is best in deeds*. Thus, God in this verse is stating that adornment is there for testing (*anna'l-zīna li'l-imtiḥān*).

The reasoning is as follows: given that God tests His creatures by the adornment that He places before them according to Q. 18:7, and given that here we have the stars termed 'adornment', it then stands to reason that just as human beings are tested by adornments, so must be the inhabitants of heaven (namely, the angels).

The target of al-Ṭabarī's vitriolic statement is now clear, being this extension of the notion of *zīna* (adornment), its application to heaven's inhabitants (the angels), and seeing in the stars a test for the angels. In a hermeneutical paradigm where the exegete

was the source of authority, where inductive reasoning and intertextual connections to other parts of the Qur'an were the source of possible interpretations, al-Māturīdī's deduction is not farfetched. Already in his interpretation of Q. 2:30 (*When your Lord told the angels, 'I am putting a successor on earth,' they said, 'How can You put someone there who will cause damage and bloodshed when we celebrate Your praise and proclaim Your holiness?'*), al-Māturīdī has no qualms discussing the possibility that the angels could sin, and that they could be tested.<sup>11</sup>

They conceived the possibility that the angels could disobey because they could be tested. The evidence for the possibility that they could be tested is evident from our statement that the angels could feel secure and fearful, and since they were praised for worshipping God [which would only make sense if they could disobey God], and threatened with punishment should they claim to be divine.

Al-Māturīdī repeats this understanding of the nature of the angels again under his interpretation of Q. 2:33–34, stating that angels are tested (*yumtaḥanūn*) by all kinds of tests (*miḥan*), and they can commit a sin or disobey God.<sup>12</sup> The issue at stake is whether Satan was an angel or not. Could an angel, an archangel to boot, disobey God, and what does that imply regarding the nature of angels? This differs markedly from what al-Ṭabarī states about the nature of the angels in his commentary on those same verses. Al-Ṭabarī finds himself going against many authorities who are almost never contradicted, like Ibn ʿAbbās and others, whose understandings of these verses clearly present the angels as creatures capable of disobedience and sin.<sup>13</sup>

The deep correlation between these two exegetes, made evident by their skirting around one another's material, indicates that al-Māturīdī's work is as reflective of the early period as al-Ṭabarī's, and that he was drawing on a pool of interpretive traditions that was known and debated among the professional exegetes. Both were building on their respective understanding of the nature of the angels, and each was willing to draw further interpretations from a theological doctrine. This comparison also shows how flimsy the line separating *al-tafsīr bi'l-ra'y* ('interpretation by personal opinion'—the accusation hurled by al-Ṭabarī) and *al-tafsīr bi'l-'ilm* ('interpretation by knowledge') actually is (thus al-Ṭabarī accused those who interpret Q. 67:5 differently as having 'opined from their own mind'). In the case of Q. 2:30 and 34, al-Ṭabarī was forced to flatly refuse material from Ibn ʿAbbās, showing that inherited material was ultimately governed by unstated hermeneutical rules that were most of the time based on theological considerations. The statement attributed to Qatāda as an interpretation of Q. 67:5 clearly has at its basis a deductive process based on Qur'anic verses, just as the fourth interpretation given by al-Māturīdī rests on a deductive connection to another Qur'anic verse. The designation *al-qawl bi'l-ra'y* is an ideological label meant to rob the interpretation of authoritative standing.

This close reading of al-Māturīdī and al-Ṭabarī together provincialises both. It forces us to reassess how we understand the standing of al-Ṭabarī in the *tafsīr* tradition, and especially his relationship with the material that he was selecting from. Reading them together allows us to walk behind the material, so to speak, to shake loose the hold that each of these scholars has on us, and gives us the ability to see beyond what they were selecting. For it is not only that we have another source in al-Māturīdī; it is that his text yields another history of *tafsīr*. *Tafsīr* seen through *Taʿwīlāt al-Qurʾān* looks different; it was practised differently; it speaks to a manner of doing *tafsīr* that al-Ṭabarī pretended did not exist. It reflects an engagement with the Qurʾan along the same line as that of Muqātil b. Sulaymān, in which the authority of the exegete is taken for granted.

What I find particularly interesting in the preceding comparison is that al-Ṭabarī did not himself mention the interpretation that irked him. As such, his discussion of the verse does not enable us to reconstruct the complete historical debate. On its own, al-Ṭabarī's pericope neither betrays the deductive process behind Qatāda's statement, nor the fact that there were other interpretations that used this line of analysis. Al-Ṭabarī's work must be read alongside al-Māturīdī's: only then will we be able to fully grasp the significance of what al-Ṭabarī achieved. When read in this light, al-Ṭabarī is shown to be far more ideological, far more radical in his work than we have hitherto realised. He was not gathering the Sunnī collective memory so much as reshaping it. Therefore, his work should be regarded as representative of one particular type of *tafsīr* activity, rather than as the epitome of the mainstream Sunnī Qurʾan interpretation of the period.

In this regard, nothing stands out more than the question of the relationship of al-Ṭabarī to the important early exegete Muqātil b. Sulaymān, the author of the first complete Qurʾan commentary.<sup>14</sup> Given the scrupulous attention of al-Ṭabarī in naming his authorities, many scholars have noted that Muqātil does not appear among them. How do we understand this absence? Is it true that al-Ṭabarī did not use Muqātil?

### From al-Māturīdī to Muqātil b. Sulaymān

Already in the 1950s, Harris Birkeland observed that al-Ṭabarī does not offer us a complete record of early exegetical material. However, he interprets this state of affairs as indicative of the centrality of al-Ṭabarī's place in the history of Islamic exegetical tradition, rather than as indicative of his partisanship. What exists in al-Ṭabarī is reflective of the Sunnī consensus, Birkeland surmises, although he recognises that:<sup>15</sup>

[al-Ṭabarī] has not written down all available traditions. He has omitted every interpretation which was definitely rejected by the *ʿijmāʿ*<sup>c</sup>



about 300 A.H. He has, it is true, included many interpretations which were not generally recognized, but he does not present a single one which was absolutely rejected.

This categorical statement is illustrative of how al-Ṭabarī has come to be depicted in modern scholarship as the epitome of mainstream Sunnism. Birkeland argued that what we find in al-Ṭabarī presents the mainstream Sunnī *ijmāʿ* ('consensus') as to what the Qur'an meant in the eyes of a fourth/tenth-century exegete. Birkeland is thus taking what al-Ṭabarī preserved as our guide to the consensus among contemporaneous Sunnīs; having taken that for granted, he judges all the omitted material to be marginal or non-mainstream. Al-Ṭabarī is thus positioned as the measure of the exegetical tradition. Birkeland is able to detect the 'missing' material in al-Ṭabarī by comparing him to a later exegete, al-Rāzī, and also by noticing that al-Ṭabarī was silent about issues that the tradition 'must' have dealt with.<sup>16</sup> Birkeland therefore concluded that other exegetes should be used to reconstruct the lost material, namely, al-Zamakhsharī and al-Bayḍāwī alongside al-Rāzī and al-Ṭabarī. These four exegetes, by his account, together present the sum total of what 'mainstream' Sunnism had to say about the Qur'an, judged always by what al-Ṭabarī preserved or did not.<sup>17</sup> But Birkeland is silent on several pertinent points. How did the later interpretive tradition preserve material that is not reported by al-Ṭabarī, indeed materials that may form the basis for mainstream interpretations? Where were such materials preserved before they appeared in such late Sunnī works? There is also the methodological problem of how we can categorise such materials as being outside the Sunnī consensus if they are now preserved in Sunnī works.<sup>18</sup>

The premise that al-Ṭabarī is the standard, with the concomitant understanding that his material presents us with the oldest material, has remained a serious problem in the field of *tafsīr* studies. Given the distortion that results from our reconfiguring of the historical data to fit around him, we have an al-Ṭabarī-centric historiography of *tafsīr* that is incapable of distancing itself from its main source and exemplar. Nöldeke represented him as the storehouse of *tafsīr* even before his Qur'an commentary was available to scholarship, expressing the wish that we had a copy of this work (then thought to have been lost). After the celebrated publication of al-Ṭabarī's commentary in Cairo, it was canonised by Goldziher in his study of *tafsīr*. Finally, as described above, this status was enshrined by Birkeland.<sup>19</sup> A recent example of this mode of doing intellectual history is Mehmet Koç's study, in which he discusses the legacy of the Qur'an commentary of Muqātil b. Sulaymān.<sup>20</sup> Koç realises that Muqātil was quoted by al-Māturīdī, as well as by al-Samarqandī, al-Thaʿlabī, al-Zamakhsharī, al-Rāzī, and many other later exegetes—with the apparent exception of al-Ṭabarī. That al-Ṭabarī does not mention Muqātil by name has been taken to mean that he did not use him, but more importantly that Muqātil needed rehabilitation so as to allow him re-entry into the tradition. Koç fails to see the significance of the fact that Muqātil was



quoted by al-Māturīdī, and as such was hardly in need of rehabilitation, and had never been forgotten to start with.

Why did Koç attempt to prove that al-Tha<sup>°</sup>labī was the one to legitimise Muqātil in the Sunnī tradition? The unstated premise is that since al-Ṭabarī did not use Muqātil, this must have meant that Muqātil's commentary was not used for 250 years after it was composed. As a result, Muqātil's presence in Sunnī Qur'an commentaries becomes a problem requiring explanation. He had apparently not been included by al-Ṭabarī within the interpretive consensus, which would seem to indicate that his commentary had been rejected by 'mainstream' Sunnism as personified by al-Ṭabarī; yet he, Muqātil, nonetheless later somehow became central to the mainstream Sunnī exegetical tradition. But this notion that Muqātil is a problem is only tenable if al-Ṭabarī is assumed to represent the tradition! Indeed, the same evidence can be used to argue the very opposite: that Muqātil b. Sulaymān was central to the mainstream Sunnī exegetical tradition, and only al-Ṭabarī attempted to avoid him—or more accurately, avoided naming him. It is al-Ṭabarī who was the odd man out here, and it is al-Māturīdī who here represented 'mainstream' Sunnism.

### **From Muqātil b. Sulaymān to al-Ṭabarī**

Given the evident centrality, as Koç demonstrated, of Muqātil b. Sulaymān, we should carefully re-examine al-Ṭabarī's *Jāmi<sup>c</sup> al-bayān* in order to determine whether he actually avoided using Muqātil, or whether he simply did not care to refer to him by name.<sup>21</sup> The Egyptian scholar Aḥmad al-Anṣārī has already noted that although al-Ṭabarī did not name al-Farrā<sup>°</sup>, he was clearly quoting him, responding to him, and criticising him.<sup>22</sup> I will show that although al-Ṭabarī does not name Muqātil b. Sulaymān in his commentary, this does not mean that al-Ṭabarī did not quote him, react to him, or, as we saw with al-Māturīdī above, attempt to undermine his interpretations. This relationship between the two is most evident when al-Ṭabarī gives periphrastic interpretations of a given verse before he starts citing authorities, and even more evident when he quotes interpretations without attributing them to anyone, in the cases where the authorities he usually quotes by *isnād* do not have interpretations for a given verse. (I presume in these cases that he is giving his own understanding based on earlier exegetical literature, in which Muqātil is central.) I will give several examples here, which are indicative of what I suspect is a widespread phenomenon in al-Ṭabarī's commentary.

Al-Ṭabarī's frequent practice of offering lengthy interpretations that are not accompanied by the citation of authorities has gone mostly unnoticed, and yet it is a fundamental part of his exegetical work. Most of our attention has been directed to his practice of interpretation-by-*isnād*. There is however extensive material presented without any authority, what I call 'orphaned interpretations'. It is my argument that

closer attention to this material will yield unexpected insights into his unstated resolution to the problem of absence of traditional material on a particular verse, or, more accurately, the pretence that there is no such material. Regardless of whether there were in fact no authorities to quote on a verse or whether he decided not to quote the authorities there were, such instances are unique in allowing for direct comparison with Muqātil b. Sulaymān, whom we know had indeed commented on every part of the Qur'an. These sites of 'orphaned interpretation' in al-Ṭabarī's commentary are thus places that stand face to face with Muqātil's work; al-Ṭabarī is unable to shield himself from Muqātil here by adducing other authorities. Comparing Muqātil and al-Ṭabarī in these loci is imperative.

In his interpretation of the word *ʿazīz* in Q. 67:2 (*God who created death, who created life to test you and reveal which of you performs best—He is the mighty (ʿazīz) the forgiving*), Muqātil has 'mighty in his sovereignty and in his revenge (*naqmatihi*) against those who disobey him (*man ʿaṣāhu*)'.<sup>23</sup> Al-Ṭabarī has 'he is the mighty, vengeful in his revenge (*intiḳāmihi*) against those who disobeyed him (*man ʿaṣāhu*)'.<sup>24</sup> This is typical of al-Ṭabarī's manner of rephrasing Muqātil: note that nothing in the verse itself could point to the interpretation Muqātil gave to the word 'mighty'; it is an interpretation that is not based on the content of the verse and as such when repeated by a later exegete we must presume it is taken from him. In al-Ṭabarī's rephrasing of Muqātil there is invariably a signature word that is left unchanged. In this case it is the word *ʿaṣāhu* ('disobeyed him'), and of course the use of the root *n-q-m* in both. Such is the case also in al-Ṭabarī's interpretation of the word *ḥasīr* in Q. 67:4, which is given in both as *kāll*, among others. The root *k-l-l* is only used by Muqātil and repeated by al-Ṭabarī, but is not used by any other authority.

We have other evidence of this dependency in Q. 67. The word *shahīq* in Q. 67:7 is glossed as 'the voice of the donkey' in both. The record shows that only Muqātil has this interpretation and all exegetes quote him by name except al-Ṭabarī, who (though he includes this interpretation) does not name the authority behind it. The same is true in Q. 67:13, Q. 67:15 (for *manākib*, both give *nawāḥī*), and Q. 67:30 (where al-Ṭabarī provides the same distinctive interpretation given by Muqātil, 'water that cannot be drawn by buckets'). All of these are examples of direct quotation or rephrasing of material from Muqātil, although without attribution. Muqātil's presence everywhere but in al-Ṭabarī is the clearest evidence that the latter was avoiding the most ubiquitous early source in the Sunnī tradition.

It is on occasion patently clear that the divisions and introductions that Muqātil used to begin his discussion of certain verses were copied and utilised by al-Ṭabarī. Thus, in their respective commentaries on Q. 67:19, which describes the flight of birds as a sign of God's power, both Muqātil and al-Ṭabarī mention that the purpose of this verse is to point to God's Oneness.<sup>25</sup> This is not an intuitive interpretation, nor is it

deducible from the content. There are instances where al-Ṭabarī has no authorities to cite, yet he ends up deriving the same, less than apparent, lesson that we find in Muqātil.

Q. 10 provides an excellent illustration of this type of shadowy accompaniment. It is remarkable how little interpretation the exegetical authorities have provided for this sura—or at least, this is the impression we get from al-Ṭabarī, since he names very few authorities here. Nonetheless, the interpretations given by Muqātil and al-Ṭabarī are on the whole congruent, with telltale signs of the latter's dependence on the former. Thus, after a lengthy interpretation of Q. 10:16, al-Ṭabarī manages to quote the very wording that Muqātil gave to the phrase *lā adrākum* at the very end of his commentary.<sup>26</sup>

Al-Ṭabarī seemingly adopted a number of Muqātil's interpretations, such as for Q. 10:20, which Muqātil glosses as a reference to the punishment and defeat that befell the Meccans at the Battle of Badr. There is nothing in that verse to indicate this, and of the early exegetes only Muqātil gives this interpretation. In other instances, al-Ṭabarī introduces an interpretation without an *isnād* with the word *qīla* ('it is said'), and that same exegesis was given by Muqātil. The 'mercy' spoken of in Q. 10:21 is glossed as 'rain' in Muqātil, which is also the interpretation that al-Ṭabarī mentions. Al-Ṭabarī does the same with Q. 10:58, where he indirectly quotes Muqātil while changing the order of the words (instead of 'Qur'an and Islam,' al-Ṭabarī has 'Islam and Qur'an'). When al-Ṭabarī recounts the signs that are in heaven alluded to in Q. 10:101, they are the same as those listed by Muqātil. At issue is less that al-Ṭabarī cited Muqātil than why he did not want to admit to quoting him. The moment that we presume an affinity between the two, we cannot help but notice it. The parts of al-Ṭabarī where this affinity is most evident and where we need to investigate are not where he provides *isnāds* but where there are none given: the orphaned interpretations.

Another example of this dependency can be documented for the interpretation of the phrase 'mornings and evenings' in Q. 25:5, *They [unbelievers] say that this [revelation of Muḥammad] is fables of earlier civilizations which he [Muḥammad] is writing down and it is being dictated to him in the mornings and the evenings (bukratan wa-aṣīlan)*. Al-Māturīdī offers the interpretation of professional exegetes (*ahl al-ta'wīl*) who stated that it means 'morning and evening' (*qāla ahl al-ta'wīl ghuduwwan wa-<sup>c</sup>ashiyan*). Al-Māturīdī goes on to refute this interpretation, which is not what concerns me here.<sup>27</sup> Clearly the periphrastic interpretation was inherited, and as a matter of fact it is taken from Muqātil's Qur'an commentary, where he states, 'they teach Muḥammad in the morning and evening' (*al-ghadāt wa-bi'l-<sup>c</sup>ishā*).<sup>28</sup> Al-Ṭabarī has here one of his unattributed interpretations, the type that I am arguing owes much to the Muqātil traditions. Al-Ṭabarī simply states, 'dictated to him in the

mornings and the evenings' (*ghudwatan wa-‘ashiyyan*).<sup>29</sup> The very phrase of Muqātil which already we know from al-Māturīdī was seen by him to be part of the opinions of 'the experts of exegesis'.

Muqātil's was the first major exegetical work, and thus had enduring influence. Muqātil was also a central author in Sunnī *tafsīr*, as clearly shown by Koç. His 'unorthodox' interpretations were not of a magnitude that disqualified him, embarrassing though they were. The nature of the *tafsīr* tradition actually militated against the outright rejection of any authority. Even 'rejected' interpretations were adduced, if only to then reject them. Indeed, such reputations for unorthodoxy haunted other authorities in *tafsīr*, but had little effect on the cumulative Sunnī exegetical heritage; all the supposedly weak and unreliable authorities in *tafsīr* were part of the mainstream Sunnī exegetical tradition. What we must realise is that the *tafsīr* tradition was already multi-vocal by the time that al-Ṭabarī appeared, and what al-Ṭabarī fails to acknowledge is not only the Muqātil tradition, but also the centrality of the Mu‘tazilī tradition of Qur‘an commentary, a tradition that was forcing Sunnī exegetes to respond and reshape their practices. While we have been treating al-Ṭabarī as if he were al-Shāfi‘ī in the realm of law, giving him a fundamental role in reshaping the *tafsīr* tradition, in reality he was but one voice among many.

### The Silences of al-Ṭabarī

In this section, I give examples to show how an overreliance on al-Ṭabarī as a summation of the early history of *tafsīr* or its development can sometimes be misleading, or can actually conceal from us the very history we are trying to uncover. The first example is also from *Sūrat al-Mulk* (Q. 67), verse 17: *or are you secure that He who is in heaven will not send ‘ḥāṣibān’*. Muqātil b. Sulaymān has this to say: 'Meaning the Lord, may He be exalted, the Lord Himself, since He is in the highest heaven' (*ya‘nī al-rabb tabāarak wa-ta‘ālā nafsahu li-annahu fī‘l-samā‘ al-‘ulyā*).<sup>30</sup> Al-Ṭabarī has nothing whatsoever on this verse. This is not an insignificant verse, and certainly not theologically unproblematic for its locating God in heaven, either.

Al-Māturīdī meanwhile has an extensive discussion on this verse, and he pays particular attention to the phrase, 'the One who is in heaven.' He states:<sup>31</sup>

He meant Himself; He informed [us] that He is the God of heaven, not that there is another God on earth different from Him, nor that He is denying that He is the God of the earth. Rather, He is God in the heavens and God in the earth (paraphrasing Q. 43:84). And it is similar to His statement, *and no three are in conversation but He is the fourth* (Q. 58:7). This certainly does not mean that if the conversation were between two individuals that He could not be the third one. It is also possible that His statement, *are you secure that the One who is in*

*heaven*, means are you secure from the One whose dominion is in the heavens, for you have not seen anyone whose dominion reaches to the heavens, so how are you not afraid of such a being whose dominion does reach to the heavens? How do you not fear His might and vengeance, when you are afraid of the kings of earth whose dominion does not exceed earth?

Clearly, al-Māturīdī is expanding upon, and to some extent responding to, Muqātil, and we need only look at al-Thaʿlabī to realise that this verse generated a heated discussion among the exegetes of the formative period, the very people al-Ṭabarī was supposed to quote. First, al-Thaʿlabī knows of an interpretation that goes back to Ibn ʿAbbās, the wording of which is uncomfortably ambiguous and echoes the phrasing of Muqātil's interpretation: 'Are you secure from the torture of the One who is in heaven, if you were to disobey Him?' While this statement is not as overtly problematic as Muqātil's interpretation, it is still ambiguous and locates God in heaven. Then, al-Thaʿlabī quotes an intriguing interpretation that is anthropological in its sensitivity.<sup>32</sup>

It is reported that this verse was worded thus (i.e. in an anthropomorphic fashion) because the Meccans used to believe that Allāh was the god of heaven while the idols were the gods of the earth, and they used to pray to God, directing themselves towards heaven when they did that, and to expect His mercy and His chastisement to come down from heaven.

Al-Thaʿlabī then adds that *al-muḥaqqiqūn* (those who know, theologians) have interpreted this verse to mean that:<sup>33</sup>

God is above heaven, just as in the verse [that instructs], *go, roam earth* [Q. 9:2]—that is, not by traversing earth (or walking upon it), but by overwhelming and controlling it. And it was also said *upon heaven* (ʿalāʾl-samāʾ) as his statement in the verse, *and I will crucify you upon the trunks* [Q. 20:71], meaning that He controls heaven and owns it, just as you say *x* is over Iraq or Ḥijāz (*fulān ʿalāʾl-ʿIrāq*), meaning that they are the governor and the emir of such-and-such a region.

It is after this interpretation that the issue at heart is revealed. Al-Thaʿlabī offers a long discursive theological analysis of the verses and traditions known collectively as 'the sitting upon' (*al-istiḥwāʾ*). He presents a solidly Ashʿarī interpretation of these Qurʾanic statements.<sup>34</sup> Likewise, al-Wāḥidī's discussion of them, which is Ashʿarī through and through, undermines the older Sunnī anthropomorphic understanding.<sup>35</sup> A glance at al-Rāzī clarifies that not only were the so-called *mujassima* ('anthropomorphists') using this verse as a proof-text for their arguments, but that

the anthropological explanation which we saw in al-Thaʿlabī is attributed to the Muʿtazilī tradition—something that al-Thaʿlabī was not willing to admit.<sup>36</sup> Suddenly, another characteristic of the Sunnī interpretive tradition becomes apparent: the older mainstream of Sunnī *tafsīr* had already co-opted much of the Muʿtazilī exegetical tradition. Significantly, al-Māturīdī had no qualms about citing Muʿtazilī interpretations when he deemed them sensible and cogent. The Sunnī interpretive tradition was not only markedly polemical, but also fundamentally malleable and adaptive. It was not primarily characterised by the *ahl al-ḥadīth* demand for *isnād* and named authority that al-Ṭabarī endeavours to drape it with. What we see in al-Māturīdī is not only a detailed rebuttal of aspects of the Muʿtazilī interpretative tradition, but more interestingly, a consistent reliance on that tradition for insights that can assist him in arguing in favour of his own position. Indeed, his work has preserved for us a large amount of material attributed to Abū Bakr al-Aṣamm as well as to Jaʿfar b. Ḥarb—to such an extent that we should now recognise the *Taʿwīlāt ahl al-Sunna* as a major source for the early Muʿtazilī tradition of *tafsīr*.<sup>37</sup>

### The Muʿtazilī *tafsīr* Tradition and its Challenge to Sunnism

As the proceeding analysis illustrates, al-Ṭabarī's Qur'an commentary was neither an exhaustive storehouse of the Sunnī consensual (*ijmāʿ*) tradition of Qur'an exegesis (it is remarkably silent about Q. 67:16), nor was it the summation of this tradition. Moreover, al-Ṭabarī's work masks the fundamental challenge of the Muʿtazilī exegetical tradition to the Sunnīs. This challenge was determinative in two ways: as a source of interpretations that came to be deemed incontestable and had to be adapted or incorporated as part of the Sunnī *tafsīr* tradition, and as the main interlocutor for the Sunnī interpretive tradition with which it struggled for supremacy. We thus have to read al-Ṭabarī and al-Māturīdī together in order to locate the earliest debates on the theological meanings of the Qur'an, since we can reconstruct these debates by comparing them. The *Taʿwīlāt* is also an essential counterbalance to the predominant tendency to rely on al-Ṭabarī. Indeed, one can argue that we have in the *Taʿwīlāt* an inverse of al-Ṭabarī's exegetical strategy. Al-Māturīdī participated in an open debate within the exegetical tradition as a whole, which addressed the arguments of its various constituent elements. In this way, he preserved a remarkable body of divergent opinions on the interpretation of the Qur'an, and he presents these as acceptable approaches to the text. Al-Ṭabarī seems to be content to present material from a confined circle of authorities. Moreover, al-Ṭabarī's insistence on the primacy of the *isnād* made this inherited exegetical material appear akin to *ḥadīth*—and, more importantly, by holding onto a set of named authorities that did not go beyond the year 200 Hijrī, al-Ṭabarī was allowing the *ahl al-ḥadīth* camp a roundabout triumph in *tafsīr* by his selective canonisation of what they could find acceptable.

My assessment of al-Ṭabarī in light of the *Taʿwīlāt* forces me to postulate that what we consider later features of Qur'an commentary were actually early features, and what we consider marginal was more central, if not the more established mode of doing *tafsīr* among the Sunnīs. Neither *isnāds* nor prophetic interpretations were at the centre. Just as in the *qirāʾāt* we have *ikhtiyārāt*, we have in *tafsīr* interpreters who were giving the meaning of the word of God according to their own judgement (not to use the word opinion). Al-Ṭabarī was the representative of one of a multitude of contentious currents inside Sunnism that were attempting to define *tafsīr*. His use of the *isnād* has to be seen not only as a form of meticulous scholarship (which it surely was), but also as the polemical utilisation of a method intended to silence the radical camp of *ahl al-ḥadīth*. Yet he also enforced a remarkable censorship on large parts of the Sunnī tradition that in effect flattened out the variety internal to the third/ninth-century Sunnī tradition of Qur'an commentary. As such, he was both a member of the *ahl al-ḥadīth* camp and a reconciler who was attempting to chart a middle way between those who rejected *tafsīr* altogether and the more mainstream traditional camp exemplified by al-Māturīdī. This ambivalence is apparent in his failure to name Muqātil b. Sulaymān as a major source, when he was clearly using him, and in his silence regarding how the powerful Muʿtazilī tradition posed a real stimulus to Sunnī exegetical practice.

### The Centrality of Theology in *tafsīr*

I continue comparing al-Ṭabarī and al-Māturīdī's methodological approaches, using Q. 67 (*Sūrat al-Mulk*), among others, in order to highlight another aspect of their work. This is the centrality of theological interpretations in Sunnī *tafsīr*, which went well beyond the philological-periphrastic approach in al-Ṭabarī, and whose theology was devoid of any *kalām* jargon on the whole. In his interpretation of the first two verses of this sura, al-Māturīdī manages to discuss the following concepts in significant detail: *mulk* ('dominion' or 'sovereignty') in both the Sunnī and Muʿtazilī traditions; whether the ontological category of the 'non-existent' is a thing (*hal al-maʿdūm shayʾ*); *ibtilā* ('testing') as the condition for humanity; and death and life and their place in human existence (with four and a half pages of interpretations). In so doing, he relies heavily on Muʿtazilī notions, both in order to determine which topics are to be discussed and in order to then refute Muʿtazilī views.<sup>38</sup> By contrast, al-Ṭabarī perfunctorily disposes of these two verses. If anything, this is an example of an effort to purge Sunnī *tafsīr* of the '*kalām*-isation' which I am arguing was an early and persistent feature of Sunnī *tafsīr*. When seen in this light, al-Rāzī's Qur'an commentary is neither an exception to nor a departure from the norm of the Sunnī *tafsīr* tradition. What is becoming more apparent about Sunnī *tafsīr* when seen in light of the *Taʿwīlāt ahl al-Sunna* is how intertwined it was with the Muʿtazilī exegetical tradition. We see a continuation of this Sunnī practice in the Nīshāpūrī



school of *tafsīr*, most notably with al-Wāḥidī.<sup>39</sup> Since the main interlocutor of al-Māturīdī was Abū Bakr al-Aṣamm, we can show that Sunnī exegetes were taking on the most important Qurʾan commentators in the opposite camp. As such, they were methodologically far more daring than the mode of authority-based interpretations employed by al-Ṭabarī would lead us to believe.

Take the respective discussions of al-Ṭabarī and al-Māturīdī on the opening verses of Q. 80:1–10, which the tradition understood as a reference to an incident when Muḥammad lost his patience with a blind man who was entreating him to allow him to become Muslim (or to teach him the Qurʾan), and Muḥammad turned instead to the powerful and rich Meccans who were present in an attempt to convert them. The issue at hand is how to understand the rebuke delivered from God to His Prophet in these verses. Al-Ṭabarī is happy to report the story, and nothing more. No discussion of the standing of the Prophet in the face of divine reproach, nor the issues of culpability or infallibility. Was what Muḥammad did a sin? What is the relationship between prophets and sinning, especially in the story of Jonah, the prophet who clearly disobeyed God's will? All of these issues are discussed in detail in al-Māturīdī, consuming five pages of reiterations of the problem of sin and the status of the prophets.<sup>40</sup>

The interpretation of Q. 80:17 (*perdition to human beings, how perfidious they are*) is another instance where al-Ṭabarī seems intent on disregarding the central concern that it raised in the Islamic tradition. Its meaning was not the issue, but the fact that it is an insult uttered by God (*shatīma*). Is it appropriate for God to hurl insults? Al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī and the Muʿtazila, we are told by al-Māturīdī, were of the opinion that we have here an instance of divine-uttered insult, and they accepted that God can use such language. Al-Māturīdī finds this offensive, and offers a detailed rebuttal of this interpretation.<sup>41</sup> It is the seriousness with which al-Māturīdī has to answer the Muʿtazilī tradition that forces us to understand Sunnī tradition in this different light. The Muʿtazilī interpretive tradition compelled the Sunnī interpretive tradition to define itself more fully against the claims of the former. Al-Ṭabarī is happy to produce an interpretation that betrays nothing of the Sunnī anxiety about the language of the divinity in this verse, and which reflects no deep engagement with the problematic language of revelation (especially when it was made the central concern of the Muʿtazilī tradition).

Another example of al-Ṭabarī's stance *vis-à-vis* the interpretive tradition is his attempt to mitigate the thrust of the Sunnī tradition, even when it is supported by the very host of names of early authorities that he typically chooses to cite. He does this by very briefly mentioning the mainstream interpretation to a given verse without offering further discussion, when in reality this particular interpretation addresses issues that are among the central concerns of the Sunnī tradition. This brevity is noteworthy,

since it is in forms of *isnād*-based interpretation (attributed to the same authorities he usually quotes) where we expect al-Ṭabarī to be exhaustive in his record. His interpretation of Q. 46:17 is a good example of this approach. The verse tells the story of a recalcitrant son who rebukes his parents, who are calling him to convert to the true religion. Muqātil mentioned that this verse was in reference to a son of the Caliph Abū Bakr.<sup>42</sup> Al-Ṭabarī mentions this episode furtively: 'the one who said this is a son of Abū Bakr, who said "Do you promise me that I will be resurrected after death?"'<sup>43</sup> This is all al-Ṭabarī has to say about this particular interpretation.

But al-Māturīdī presents us with a far more complicated picture. He informs us that the 'traditional exegetical tradition' has understood this verse to refer to 'Abd al-Rahmān, the son of Abū Bakr.<sup>44</sup> He then recounts the tradition in all its details. Al-Māturīdī himself rejects this interpretation and presents his own understanding, which is that it is a general reference to the human condition.<sup>45</sup> He concludes by giving a hermeneutical rule for specifying the meaning of a certain verse: one cannot understand a verse to make such a reference unless 'it has a backing from God Himself through a statement from His Prophet stating clearly that this verse is about such-and-such an individual, a statement that has to have been transmitted by the multitude (*tawātur*) of Muslims. In the absence of such clear textual evidence, we are better off not accepting such interpretations.'<sup>46</sup>

This is an interesting situation: a particular interpretation has been passed down by the tradition, neither al-Ṭabarī nor al-Māturīdī is willing to accept it, and both react differently to it. Al-Ṭabarī opted to pretend that only one authority had mentioned this interpretation; there is no list of who narrated it, but neither is there a rebuttal of it. But al-Māturīdī dealt with it directly, using the status of the son of Abū Bakr as a leading Companion as the basis for his rejecting it, and offers his defense of a new understanding. There is no recourse here by al-Māturīdī to any authority other than his own, and he apparently sees no reason to justify such an approach to doing *tafsīr*. He even uses this case as a moment to offer a general interpretive principle! By contrast, al-Ṭabarī acts as a judge and adjudicator in relation to the inherited material, weighing in on one side of an already existing interpretation, and acting as if he were doing so in light of a disinterested Sunnī outlook. Yet *tafsīr* as it appears in al-Māturīdī's commentary is an ongoing process, and the individualistic nature of this process is brought to the surface. Al-Māturīdī in this instance is standing against the received tradition, but he supplies us with the background information as well as his own reasoning. That the interpretation of this verse as a reference to a son of the Caliph Abū Bakr was a well-entrenched Sunnī reading is clear from its reappearance in al-Tha'labī's commentary (as well as in Ibn 'Aṭīyya and al-Rāzī, among many others). There, far more revealing information is provided, indicating that the interpretation has its roots in the rivalry between Mu'āwiya and 'Ā'isha and their supporters.<sup>47</sup> If anything, Muqātil here has set the tone, and al-Ṭabarī's efforts do not dislodge him.

Where is ‘mainstream’ Sunnī exegesis to be found among these various interpretations? Is it in al-Māturīdī’s recourse to the notion of *tawātur* to undermine *tawātur* in *tafsīr*? Is it in al-Ṭabarī’s pretence that the interpretation he wants to ignore is historically insignificant? Or is it in the persistence of this still-raw wound from an early Muslim civil war as reflected in what is clearly an ancient interpretation, which al-Thaʿlabī has preserved for us? We now need a panoramic approach to *tafsīr*. What the Sunnī *tafsīr* tradition was can only be determined by comparing a wide range of authors, including those whose Qurʾan commentaries have only been published in the last decade (for example, al-Thaʿlabī, al-Māturīdī, and al-Wāḥidī). Far more significant is the need to place the work of al-Māturīdī on the same level as that of al-Ṭabarī.

The process of understanding an exegete is gradual. The scope of our knowledge has to be extensive, particularly regarding figures like al-Ṭabarī and al-Māturīdī. Given how massive their Qurʾan commentaries are and how unpredictable their contents can be, our conclusions are always tentative and inconclusive. A case in point is the word ‘throne’ (ʿarsh) in the Qurʾan. This is a word that occurs frequently, usually in the well-known phrase [God] *sat on the throne* (istawā ʿalāʾl-ʿarsh).<sup>48</sup> As might be expected, the verb ‘to sit’ or ‘to mount’ (istawā) has received much attention, and this is reflected in the Qurʾan commentaries of al-Ṭabarī and al-Māturīdī. One could have reasonably anticipated that similar attention would be given to the word ‘throne’, but it does not appear that al-Ṭabarī is concerned with it at all. Given that he might have interpreted the word in a discussion unrelated to the verses where the word appears, I am not discounting the possibility of still finding some explanation by him. Yet, as he does not meaningfully discuss what the divine throne is and how to understand it at any of the verses in which this word appears, I am presuming that al-Ṭabarī opted to overlook what must have been quite abundant interpretive traditions about it. We know that this must be the case from the massive *ḥadīth* literature on the word. Al-Māturīdī has preserved several metaphorical interpretations for this term—for instance, that the throne connotes resurrection, or sovereignty. We may presume that he was as uneager as al-Ṭabarī to present the large number of mythologically rich interpretations and traditions that the Sunnīs had by then been circulating about this term, as is evidenced by their later reappearance in the *tafsīr* tradition (see al-Thaʿlabī, for example).<sup>49</sup> Al-Māturīdī seems unable not to quote a non-metaphorical interpretation—one that refers to ‘the throne (*sarīr*) of kingship’ (reflecting the popular Sunnī understanding).<sup>50</sup> This is but a minute reflection of the material that remains carefully absent from his discussion. Here, we see that both al-Ṭabarī and al-Māturīdī opt to silence a debate whose contours they reject.

It is time now for the Sunnī exegetical tradition to escape the confines of being defined by a single exegete. For a long time, al-Ṭabarī has occupied that role. Yet there is no need to continue to define the field by him. This demotion of al-Ṭabarī is not intended

to diminish his importance; on the contrary, the purpose is to place his achievements in context, and as a result to read his commentary more insightfully. The secondary scholarship inadvertently ends up presenting al-Ṭabarī as far less polemical than he is. The *isnāds* in his Qur'an commentary seem to have succeeded in obscuring his theological program from our view: he was not 'gathering', he was not only 'adjudicating' the *tafsīr* tradition; he was profoundly reshaping it. He has as much agency as any of the Mu'tazilī exegetes, and he was not stumbling into the material he gathered, as witnessed by how much material he left uncited. He was presenting us then not with how *tafsīr* was at his time, but with how he wanted *tafsīr* to be practised.

### The Authority of the Exegete

Nothing exemplifies the differences between al-Ṭabarī and al-Māturīdī more than how they each treat Q. 15:2, *perhaps the unbelievers would like to be Muslims*.<sup>51</sup> The first issue that al-Ṭabarī deals with is the variant readings of the particle *ruḃa*, which some professional reciters read as *rubba*. Both, al-Ṭabarī informs us, are acceptable readings.<sup>52</sup> The second issue raised by him is the meaning of the article *mā* in the combined particle *ruḃa-mā* (or *rubba-mā*). Philologists and grammarians are then cited from both the Kufan and the Basran schools. But taking this as a dispassionate, objective philological investigation of the grammatical and syntactical function of this particle is misleading, for soon we are asked to make an exemption for Qur'anic usage (so that this particle can be used in the Qur'an in a way diametrically opposed to the established correct usage). The reasons for this exception are theological: since God knows the future, He can confuse human language! A poetic citation is also adduced. This discussion looks like a serious grappling with the text of the Qur'an, ponderous and professionally grammatical, but this scholastic effect is typical of a philological discussion that in reality is carried out to explain a reading that is not supported by philology.

At this point in the exegetical discussion, halfway into the contractual transaction with al-Ṭabarī, he has performed what we want from a serious exegete and consequently has gained our trust, and we expect that a dispassionate interpretive approach will follow. The proceeding interpretations are thus based on this trust accrued. Insofar as we are now taking the verse to be predictive of the future, to be taking place in the world to come, after the world has ended and judgement has been meted out to humanity, we have been prepared to expect what is in essence a salvific interpretation that has little to do with the verse's grammatical or syntactical structure, or its context in the pericope. Three pages of *isnād*-material is then presented. They transform this verse into a reference to a complicated scenario in the world to come in which the very nature of God's salvation is exemplified. Al-Ṭabarī offers several interpretations centered around one theme.<sup>53</sup> In one he mentions the opinion of one commentator

that, at the moment of death, the unbeliever wishes to have been Muslim (echoing verses Q. 23:99–100). This is the only instance where we see any interpretation that puts the act of regret and desire to be Muslim in the worldly life. The rest of the interpretations are about the afterlife. One of the interpretations is what I would call a normative and unembellished interpretation, it simply reports that ‘this verse is about unbelievers on the Day of Judgement, when they wish that they were monotheists’. Another interpretation simply states that this refers to events on the Day of Judgement. We are to understand that the issue bothering the interpreter about this verse is not the meaning of the verse, but the temporal and special location of this verse: Are they wishing to be Muslims in this world or in the afterlife? Al-Ṭabarī wants the reader to understand that this verse is predictive, that it is a visionary verse about what will happen in the future, he already argued grammatically for such an understanding. It is describing a scenario and a situation that will come in the future. The most common and emphasised interpretation is however far more elaborate, and gives this verse a profound significance beyond the fate and mental state of the unbelievers. Al-Ṭabarī states that many commentators believe that this verse describes a very complicated situation that will happen in the afterlife and after humanity has been already judged. All of humanity is already sorted into two camps, the saved in Paradise, and the damned in Hell. Muslims who have sinned and committed grave and cardinal sins are of course also judged and placed in Hell to suffer with the unbelievers. Soon the unbelievers start to mock and ridicule the damned, sinful believers who are suffering with them. It is then that this verse comes into play, for God will interfere. The interpretations are elaborate and presented in dramatically constructed fashion with dialogues, tension, and resolution. For example:<sup>54</sup>

It has been reported that when the Day of Resurrection takes place and humanity is judged, and the people of Hell are in the Fire and with them Muslims who have been damned, the people of Fire will ask the believers: ‘Are you not Muslims?’ They will answer: ‘Yes, we are.’ Then they are told: ‘How did this Islam help you then? And you are with us in Hell and in Fire?’ They will say: ‘We committed sins and we are punished for them.’ God hears this conversation, and He orders every believer, everyone who prayed in the direction of Mecca, to be taken out of Hell. It is then that the people of Fire say: ‘Oh how we wish that we were Muslims.’ This is what this verse describes.

God also is depicted as being ‘angry with His mercy’ (*fa-yaghḍab Allāh lahum bi-faḍl raḥmatihī*), angry at the mocking directed at the believers, and moved by His mercy to act; and He, God, then redeems the sinful Muslims and saves them.<sup>55</sup> In other interpretations, however, God acts more in accordance with orthodox beliefs about how God forgives sinful Muslims. He is depicted as asking the prophets and the angels to intercede with Him for mercy for the sinners, and it is only after the prophets

and the angels seek this forgiveness that God obliges.<sup>56</sup> This is the doctrine of *shafāʿa* ('intercession'), by which Muḥammad will intercede with God to forgive sinful Muslims and redeem them and save them from Hell. It is then that the unbelievers wish that they were Muslims. In other versions of this story, the unbelievers ask the believers, 'What good did the declaration of faith, the formula of monotheism, "There is no God but God," do for you?' In another version, God orders His angels to save from hell anyone who has in them an iota of faith (*mithqāl dharra*). Faith is not deeds, here, but salvation.<sup>57</sup>

These interpretations are not unmotivated. They are part of a major theological debate about the value of deeds, the measure of faith, who gets saved, and how. It is not hard to see through the traditions that this is an anti-Muʿtazilī interpretation: a grave sinner remains a believer. The readers are not unaware of this weight to the interpretations, one supposes. This lengthy discussion ends with no editorial comment, but none really is needed because, insofar as the cumulative effect of these interpretations adds up to the same conclusion, there is no need to choose: unbelievers are going to regret their perfidy because Muslim sinners are going to be saved.

I have given a detailed account of al-Ṭabarī's interpretation to illustrate the contrast with al-Māturīdī. The latter sums up the former's five pages of discussion into one sentence:<sup>58</sup>

The majority of exegetes said: 'They desire to be Muslims and monotheists, after they see that those monotheists who were being punished in Hell for their sins are saved and brought out of Hell, either by God's mercy or by intercession (*shafāʿa*). It is then that the unbelievers wish that they were Muslims and monotheists.'

This is an apt summary. This interpretation is then summarily rejected: it is too far-fetched (*lākin hādihā baʿīd*), states al-Māturīdī. It is irrational, for why should a human being who is an unbeliever wait this long to realise what a calamitous life he has led, would not anyone who is resurrected realise that he is done for? What about the whole process of Judgement Day? Or on their march to Hell? At any of these stages a rational human being would realise that he made a horrendous choice in his worldly life, and would surely have wished that he were a Muslim or a monotheist.

Al-Māturīdī did not use philology to reach this conclusion; he did not even care to cite the variant reading of the particle *ruḃa*. He was simply unsatisfied with the cumulative wisdom of all the interpreters, and swiftly dismissed their interpretation for the reason that it does not make sense. Nor does he think that unbelievers will not regret their lives, for the Qur'an already declared that they will regret their lives even as they lie dying (quoting Q. 23:99–100). The issue is what this particular verse is about.

He was right to be sceptical, and the grammar of the verse is on his side; the other exegetes had avoided both the context and the implication of this dark verse: that humans are intransigent, recalcitrant, and at most very few of them might wish to be Muslims. This verse is about the condition of human beings in this world, not afterworldly judgement. It has no salvific import, carries no hope. Al-Māturīdī then offers his interpretation:<sup>59</sup>

Perhaps an individual of the unbelievers would wish to be a Muslim under certain conditions, or at times when they are able to see the Truth, and Truth does appear manifest to them, but they are prevented from becoming Muslims because of a fear of losing some of the glory of this world, or forfeiting something they really want.

This is not how we understand Sunnī *tafsīr* to be practised. This is an exegete standing against the collective wisdom of his own school, forgoing the opportunity to lay out an anti-Muʿtazilī interpretation. This is an uncompromising voice, not a hint of sanctimonious fear, advancing a breathtaking, even daring interpretation, one that will stand alone in the history of the interpretation of this verse in Islamic tradition (I have failed to find any echo of this interpretation in any Qurʾan commentary I inspected). Yet this uncontested authority to interpret is at the heart of the Sunnī tradition. This is not unique to al-Māturīdī, I would insist. Most of the Sunnī exegetical tradition acted and behaved as such—more circumspect, perhaps, but no less daring. This puts al-Ṭabarī’s project into a clearer light. I would argue that he sought to salvage as much of the *ahl al-ḥadīth* position as possible, rehabilitating their heritage and making it more mainstream, but also pruning it of its extreme elements. He was claiming to be doing *tafsīr* as if it were a *ḥadīth* discipline, while also hoping that his method would become acceptable among the more mainstream Sunnī commentators.

### The Limits of al-Māturīdī

That al-Māturīdī acts as a useful corrective and companion when we read al-Ṭabarī is by now hopefully evident. However, this should not be understood to mean that al-Māturīdī provides a more historically accurate record of early *tafsīr* than al-Ṭabarī. Rather, each represents a region and an approach to *tafsīr* at the end of the third Hijrī century. Moreover, using al-Māturīdī to illuminate al-Ṭabarī should be a bi-directional process, for al-Ṭabarī also assists us in understanding al-Māturīdī. As a matter of fact, treating both together can provide us with much insight into the concerns and exegetical methods of the early period. However, I am inclined to see in al-Māturīdī the missing link and the material necessary to fully understanding how the craft of *tafsīr* was practised by mainstream Sunnīs, as it is his, rather than al-Ṭabarī’s, exegetical method which played an important role in shaping the



approaches of later major exegetes. Given the possible influence of al-Māturīdī on al-Rāzī, we have to reassess the status of the *Taʿwīlāt* in the Sunnī tradition.<sup>60</sup>

Here I give several examples of how al-Ṭabarī can help us to understand what is at stake in some of al-Māturīdī's exegeses, and in some instances indicates that the latter omitted the prevalent traditional interpretation. Take al-Ṭabarī's interpretation of Q. 68:42, *on the day We [God?] uncover a leg and ask them to prostrate and they [the unbelievers] cannot*. Al-Ṭabarī recounts a series of fantastical *ḥadīths* about the Day of Judgement, several of which present God taking on the form of a being that quizzes the believers and non-believers as to whether they are faithful or not. These traditions are markedly anthropomorphic, and are what I would call *ḥashawī*-type *ḥadīth*. In one of them, God Himself unveils His leg to the believing Muslims, who then prostrate to Him.<sup>61</sup>

Looking at the interpretation of this verse provided by al-Māturīdī, we find a rather austere tone, with no hint of possibility that the word 'leg' could have anything but a metaphorical meaning. It is taken to refer to humans and their experience of suffering.<sup>62</sup> He then quotes an opinion on the authority of the *ahl al-kalām* ('theologians'), which denies any possibility that this verse could mean that God could test humanity in the world to come, since that is not a place of testing; humanity has already endured tests in this world. What is interesting is that al-Māturīdī relies here on the authority of the famous Muʿtazilī theologian Jaʿfar b. Ḥarb in order to refute al-Ṭabarī's *ḥadīths*, which he does not choose to include. We could not possibly have understood al-Māturīdī here without knowing the background, preserved for us in al-Ṭabarī, where 'leg' is taken to refer to God's own leg and where we have a scene of testing (*imtiḥān*) of humanity occurring after death.<sup>63</sup>

A more theologically charged situation is found in the case of Q. 27:8, *and when he [Moses] came to the bush, he was addressed: Blessed [is] the One who is in the fire and Who is surrounding it*. The phrase *the One who is in the fire* (*man fī'l-nār*) posed a theological problem. Was it God? It must have been, for the particle used (*man*) usually denotes animate beings. This understanding of the verse is recorded in al-Ṭabarī, and reflects a comfortable acceptance of what was clearly an early Sunnī anthropomorphic conception of God among some exegetes: 'Some exegetes said that He meant Himself by this reference, He was in the fire. Some other exegetes said that the fire was His light, exalted be He.'<sup>64</sup> This is also another example of the complexity of the exegetical tradition, namely, how it can overwhelm anyone, including al-Ṭabarī. This interpretation is as anthropomorphic as any given in Muqātil's commentary. Purging the vast Sunnī exegetical tradition of all such language was clearly an impossible task, and it is in this massive abundance that we have the possibility of finding early material (even if it later came to be rejected). This interpretation would be refused by the later exegetical tradition, yet it is

preserved for us in al-Ṭabarī—indicating that he was not representative of the Sunnī consensus, as is often claimed, but (more simply) of his own intellectual viewpoint.

Al-Māturīdī's interpretation of this verse begins with a polemic against how the exegetical tradition has misunderstood it:<sup>65</sup>

The interpretations of the exegetes of this verse are mightily confused. Some have understood this verse in such a way that can only add to their stupidity, and this indicates their distance from truth and correct understanding, making them blind.

Clearly, for al-Māturīdī, the collective voice of the exegetes cannot define the tradition, and here he sets himself apart from the majority. He then offers various metaphorical ways of understanding this verse, and also insists that since the particle *man* can refer to inanimate things, it should be understood to refer to the *place* of the fire (rather than who was in it). He is even willing to entertain a reading of the verse preserved by Ibn Mas'ūd—though it lacks confirmation, as al-Māturīdī is prepared to admit—that was not mentioned by al-Ṭabarī. The problem with al-Māturīdī's discussion of this verse is not that his interpretation is metaphorical or at odds with one of al-Ṭabarī's interpretations. Rather, it is the fact that we are not told what sort of interpretations al-Māturīdī is objecting to. Here is a clear blind spot in his approach, as he is unwilling to entertain theologically problematic interpretations (usually of the ancient anthropomorphic type) that disagree with his own theological outlook. He too is representative of his own intellectual viewpoint.

A similar case is al-Māturīdī's interpretation of Q. 12:110, which is one of the saddest verses in the Qur'an and refers to the travails of a prophetic mission.<sup>66</sup> It speaks of the despair of the prophets in their realisation that they might have been duped by God or that they were the victims of a lie. Al-Māturīdī does give us a complete interpretation of the verse reflecting the inherited traditions; he does provide the two variant readings, the two main possible meanings, and a *ḥadīth* in which ʿĀ'isha defends one against the other. All of this is in a way sufficient. But it hardly conveys the hermeneutical trauma that this verse inflicted on the exegetical tradition. Al-Ṭabarī has preserved for us this rich tapestry, with wave after wave of traditions grappling with this unsettling verse, nine pages in total.<sup>67</sup> There is even a dramatic flair in some of the traditions, with a scholar anticipating the anguish of the student who wants the verse to mean what he hopes it could mean, only to be told it is what the student fears, with the interjection, 'Are they, the prophets, not human?' Indeed, al-Ṭabarī himself is at a loss as to how to deal with the massive material on this verse, and he clearly finds it unsettling. Did the prophets doubt God? The theologically-disciplined al-Māturīdī is more guarded in these instances, and unwilling to give voice to this abundance of popular Sunnī traditions.

## Conclusion

The field of *tafsīr* studies now is in a remarkable position. We have witnessed in the past decade the publication of several major Qur'an commentaries: the *Kashf wa'l-bayān* (ten volumes) of al-Tha'labī, then the *Ta'wīlāt* (17 volumes) of al-Māturīdī, and just recently, the massive *al-Basīṭ* (24 volumes) of al-Wāḥidī. This is in addition to a host of minor exegetes whose works were unavailable a decade ago, such as Makkī and others.<sup>68</sup> If we add to this the already existing published works, such as those of Muqātil and al-Sulamī, then we have accessible a variety of works that cover an unprecedented range. Most significant in this new landscape is the re-emergence of the Mu'tazilī tradition as central to our investigation. With the material now available in al-Māturīdī's Qur'an commentary, and what we have in al-Rāzī's massive work, we can begin to glimpse the lines of intersection between the Sunnī and the Mu'tazilī currents of *tafsīr*. We await further studies from Suleiman Mourad on al-Jishumī, whose exegetical work is our major surviving Mu'tazilī commentary.<sup>69</sup>

A comparison between al-Ṭabarī and al-Māturīdī also points to a fascinating phenomenon in Sunnī *tafsīr* studies, which is the problem of the dark third century Hijrī. Heavy reliance on the selective approach of al-Ṭabarī resulted in a downplaying of the third century. He himself names no authority from this era, apart from Abū °Ubayda, although he clearly employs the extensive grammatical works that were produced in that time, including the insights of al-Farrā°. What we have to document now is the names of scholars from this period, and then contextualise their contributions. Al-Māturīdī and al-Ṭabarī go a long way toward addressing this gap if we reconfigure them as exegetes that were active in (and indeed products of) this century, rather than only as preservers of earlier material. Al-Ṭabarī can only be understood as a reaction to the Sunnī exegetical tradition of that century, a tradition that is better understood through the work of al-Māturīdī. The first order of business is to revisit the list of authors and works of *tafsīr* in the *Fihrist* of Ibn al-Nadīm, as well as the list in al-Tha'labī's introduction to his Qur'an commentary, in order to thoroughly detail the authors of the third/ninth century. Only by anchoring the work of al-Ṭabarī in the third century can we truly give him his due.

## NOTES

\* I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers of the article. Marianna Klar was the best editor I could have hoped to have. Her detailed comments on the first draft of this article were extensive and helped me sharpen my arguments.

1 Each of these editions is independent of the other and uses different manuscripts, which makes them all useful in assessing the crucial readings in the work. The two main editions to be consulted of the *Ta'wīlāt* are the following: al-Māturīdī, *Ta'wīlāt ahl al-sunna*, ed. Majdī Bāsallūm (10 vols. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-°Ilmiyya, 2005); al-Māturīdī, *Ta'wīlāt al-Qur'ān*,

ed. Ahmet Vanlığlu *et al.* (18 vols. Istanbul: Mızan Yayınevi, 2005–2011). However, the only critical edition is this Turkish edition, and it is the one that should be used when possible. It has indices in each volume, and a cumulative index in volume 18. The third edition, whose print and layout are neither reader-friendly, is al-Māturīdī, *Ta'wīlāt ahl al-sunna*, ed. Fāṭima al-Khaymī (5 vols. Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risāla, 2004). I will be using the Turkish edition throughout this article.

2 Ulrich Rudolph divides the history of scholarship on al-Māturīdī into three phases. The last of these phases started in 1970 with Kholeif's publication of *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd*. Given the significance and the magnitude of the *Ta'wīlāt*, we should add a fourth phase. See Rudolph, *Al-Māturīdī und die Sunnitische Theologie*, p. 15. Even what we think that we already know about the theology of al-Māturīdī is bound to be reassessed in light of the extensive theological material found in the *Ta'wīlāt*.

3 See Goetz, 'Māturīdī und sein Kitāb Ta'wīlāt al-Qur'ān'. Here is a preliminary list of secondary literature on *Ta'wīlāt*: Raḥman, *An Introduction to al-Maturidi's Ta'wīlāt Ahl al-Sunna*; Galli, 'Some Aspects of al-Māturīdī's Commentary'; Dakkāsh, 'Maryam bint 'Imrān fī kitāb Ta'wīlāt ahl al-sunna'.

4 The classical study of al-Ṭabarī remains Gilliot's *Exégèse, langue et théologie*.

5 All interpretations of the Qur'an here are based on M.A.S. Abdel Haleem's 2004 Oxford translation, with some revisions.

6 al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, vol. 29, pp. 3–4.

7 al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, vol. 29, p. 4.

8 al-Māturīdī, *Ta'wīlāt al-Qur'ān*, vol. 15, pp. 293–294.

9 There is always the possibility that this particular interpretation was retroactively attributed to Qatāda.

10 'Thumma yakūnu fī ja' al-nujūm zīna li-samā' al-dunyā anna ahl al-samā' imtuḥinū wa-ibtulū ayyuhum aḥsan 'amalan kamā ibtuliya bihi ahl al-arḍ. A-lā tarā ilā mā dhukira fī ahl al-arḍ min qawlihi: innā ja'alnā mā 'alā' l-arḍ zīnatan laḥā li-nabluwahum ayyuhum aḥsan 'amalan. Fa-akhbara anna al-zīna li'l-imtiḥān' (al-Māturīdī, *Ta'wīlāt al-Qur'ān*, vol. 15, p. 294).

11 'Wa-istajāzū imkān al-ʿiṣyān 'inda'l-miḥna. wa-dalīl al-miḥna mā bayyannā min al-fi' l-bi'l-amn wa'l-khawf al-madḥkūr, wa-mā mudīḥū bi-ʿibādatihim li'llāh ta'ālā, wa-mā ū' idū law idda'ū al-ulūḥiyya' (al-Māturīdī, *Ta'wīlāt al-Qur'ān*, vol. 1, p. 73). I am grateful to Marianna Klar for her suggestion that I look at Q. 2:30 in both al-Māturīdī and al-Ṭabarī.

12 al-Māturīdī, *Ta'wīlāt al-Qur'ān*, vol. 1, p. 84.

13 See especially his remarks against Ibn 'Abbās, al-Rabī' b. Anas, and Ibn Zayd (al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, vol. 1, p. 209, sub Q. 2:30) as well as his remarks against the notion of angels having the capacity to sin (al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, vol. 1, p. 227 (sub Q. 2:34)).

14 On Muqātil b. Sulaymān see especially Sinai, *Fortschreibung und Auslegung* and 'The Qur'anic Commentary of Muqātil b. Sulaymān'. See also Koç, 'A Comparison of the References to Muqātil b. Sulaymān'.

15 Birkeland, *The Lord Guideth*, pp. 9–10.

16 Birkeland, *The Lord Guideth*, p. 10.

17 'In reality every earnest discussion had finished when al-Bayḍāwī wrote his commentary' (Birkeland, *The Lord Guideth*, p. 11).

18 I have argued elsewhere that it is the Nīshāpūrī school of *tafsīr* that was the conduit of its preservation.

19 See references for both in Birkeland, *The Lord Guideth*, p. 9, n. 2.

20 Koç, 'A Comparison of the References to Muqātil b. Sulaymān'.

21 The notion that al-Ṭabarī has not used Muqātil b. Sulaymān is now a truism in scholarship; see for example Nicolai Sinai's remarks in 'The Qur'anic Commentary of Muqātil b. Sulaymān': 'While it is true that such indictment only concerns Muqātil's standing as a transmitter of Hadīth and his theological outlook, Muqātil's conspicuous absence from the roster of earlier exegetes cited by Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) indicates that by the third/ninth century even Muqātil's reputation as an exegete had to a large extent dissipated' (pp. 116–117) and 'Thus, it may well be that Muqātil's failure to explicitly engage with earlier exegetical work was partly responsible for the fact that a later commentator like Ṭabarī did not explicitly engage with him' (p. 132).

22 Quoted in Shah, 'Al-Ṭabarī and the Dynamics of *tafsīr*', p. 84 (see esp. p. 118, n. 10).

23 Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, vol. 4, p. 389: 'Huwa al-ʿazīz fī mulkihi fī naqmatihī li-man ʿaṣāhu.'

24 al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, vol. 29, p. 1: 'wa-huwa al-qawīyy al-shadīd intiqāmuhu mimman ʿaṣāhu.'

25 Muqātil has 'Thumma waʿazahum li-yaʿtabirū fī ṣinʿ Allāh fa-yuwaḥḥidūnahu, fa-qāla' (Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, vol. 4, p. 392); al-Ṭabarī, 'Fa-lahum bi-dhālika mudhakkir in dhakarū wa-muʿtabar in iʿtabarū: yaʿlamūna bihi inna rabbahum wāḥid lā sharik lahu' (al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, vol. 29, p. 8).

26 Muqātil has, 'wa-lā ashʿarakum bi-hādhāʾl-Qurʾān' (Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān*, vol. 2, p. 231); al-Ṭabarī, 'wa-lā aʿlamakum bihi wa-lā ashʿarakum bihi' (al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, vol. 11, p. 97).

27 al-Māturīdī, *Taʾwīlāt al-Qurʾān*, vol. 10, p. 223.

28 Muqātil, *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān*, vol. 3, p. 227.

29 al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, vol. 18, p. 183.

30 Muqātil, *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān*, vol. 4, p. 391.

31 al-Māturīdī, *Taʾwīlāt al-Qurʾān*, vol. 15, p. 305.

32 al-Thaʿlabī, *al-Kashf waʾl-bayān*, vol. 9, p. 359.

33 al-Thaʿlabī, *al-Kashf waʾl-bayān*, vol. 9, pp. 359–360.

34 al-Thaʿlabī, *al-Kashf waʾl-bayān*, vol. 9, p. 360.

35 al-Wāḥidī, *al-Basīṭ*, vol. 22, p. 55.

36 al-Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, vol. 30, p. 70.

37 This observation goes beyond what Josef van Ess has already noted. It is now imperative to glean the Muʿtazilī material available in the *Taʾwīlāt* for scholars of early Muʿtazilism. On Jaʿfār b. Ḥarb, see van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft*, vol. 4, pp. 68–77. On al-Aṣamm, see van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft*, vol. 2, pp. 396–418. The material preserved in the *Taʾwīlāt* from both exegetes is extensive, and deserves to be edited separately. I am in the process of preparing a study of this material.

38 These very topics are the ones discussed by al-Rāzī in relation to this sura. The issue of the influence of al-Māturīdī has to be examined more carefully, now that we can point to similarities between him and al-Rāzī.

39 See Saleh, 'The Last of the Nishapuri School', pp. 223–243, esp. p. 236.

40 al-Māturīdī, *Taʾwīlāt al-Qurʾān*, vol. 17, pp. 45–49.

41 al-Māturīdī, *Taʾwīlāt al-Qurʾān*, vol. 17, pp. 54–55.

42 Muqātil, *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān*, vol. 4, p. 21.

43 al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, vol. 26, p. 19: 'An Ibn 'Abbās ... qāla: alladhī qāla hādhā ibn li-Abī Bakr raḍiya Allāh 'anhu, qāla: ata'idunī an akhruja, ata'idunī an ub'atha ba'd al-mawt.'

44 al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, vol. 26, p. 19: 'Kharraja ahl al-ta'wīl hādhihi'l-āya fī 'Abd al-Raḥmān bin Abī Bakr al-ṣiddīq wa-wālidatuhu fulāna'.

45 al-Māturīdī, *Ta'wīlāt al-Qur'ān*, vol. 13, pp. 363–364.

46 al-Māturīdī, *Ta'wīlāt al-Qur'ān*, vol. 13, p. 363: 'Fa-lā yaṣrufu al-āya ilā man dhukirū illā bi-bayān min Allāh ta'ālā 'alā lisān rasūlihi ṣallā Allāh 'alayhi wa-sallam, annahā fī kadhā wa-kadhā wa-fī fulān wa-fulān 'alā ṭarīq al-tawātūr, fa-'indā dhālika yuqālu mā qālū fa-ammā idhā lam tathbut al-nuṣūṣ wa'l-ishāra ilā qawm bi'l-tawātūr fa'l-kaff 'an dhālika aslam.'

47 al-Tha'labī, *al-Kashf wa'l-bayān*, vol. 9, p. 13.

48 See for example Q. 7:54, Q. 10:3, Q. 20:5, Q. 25:59, and Q. 32:4, among many others.

49 See al-Tha'labī, *al-Kashf wa'l-bayān*, vol. 8, p. 267 (sub Q. 40:7) where he gives a detailed description of the throne (wa-ammā ṣīfat al-'arsh).

50 al-Māturīdī, *Ta'wīlāt al-Qur'ān*, vol. 7, p. 383.

51 'Rubbamā yawaddu'lladhīna kafarū law kānū muslimīn'.

52 al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, vol. 14, p. 1.

53 al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, vol. 14, pp. 2–5.

54 al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, vol. 14, p. 2.

55 al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, vol. 14, p. 3.

56 al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, vol. 14, p. 3.

57 al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, vol. 14, p. 4.

58 'Qāla 'āmmat ahl al-ta'wīl: innamā yawaddūna al-Islām wa'l-tawḥīd ba'da mā 'udhhdhiba fī'l-nār qawm min ahl al-tawḥīd bi-dhunūbihim thumma ukhrijū minhā bi'l-shafā'a aw bi'l-raḥma, fa-'inda dhālika yatamannā ahl al-shirk wa-yawaddūna al-Islām wa'l-tawḥīd' (al-Māturīdī, *Ta'wīlāt al-Qur'ān*, vol. 8, p. 7).

59 'Wa-rubbamā yatamannā al-āḥād min al-kafara wa-yawaddūna law kānū muslimīn fī aḥwāl wa-awqāt yaḥzharu lahum al-ḥaqq, wa-qad bāna lahum al-ḥaqq, lākin alladhī yamna'uhum 'an al-Islām fawt shay' min al-dunyā wa-dhahāb shay' qad ṭami'ū fīhi' (al-Māturīdī, *Ta'wīlāt al-Qur'ān*, vol. 8, p. 8).

60 See the discussion above for the possible influence of al-Māturīdī on al-Rāzī.

61 al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, vol. 29, pp. 39–42, this particular example is at p. 39. The Arabic text is: 'Qāla: yatamaththalu Allāh li'l-khalq yawm al-qiyāma ḥattā yamurru al-muslimūn, qāla: fa-yaqūlu: man ta'budūna? fa-yaqūlūna: na'budu Allāh lā nushriku bihi shay'an fa-yantahiruhum marratayn aw thalātha, fa-yaqūlu: hal ta'rīfūn rabbakum? fa-yaqūlūna: subḥānahu idhā i'tarafa ilaynā 'arafnāhu. Qāla: fa-'inda dhālika yakshifu 'an sāqin fa-lā yabqā mu'min illā kharra li'llāh sājidan.'

62 al-Māturīdī, *Ta'wīlāt al-Qur'ān*, vol. 16, pp. 32–34.

63 However, we should be careful not to draw the categorical conclusion from this example, that al-Māturīdī is incapable of quoting wild mythological explanations that are of the *hashawī* type. When explaining Q. 59:21 (were We to send down this Qur'an on a mountain, you would find it humbled, crushed from the fear of God), al-Māturīdī quotes a tradition on the authority of al-Kalbī on the heaviness of the word of God, while al-Ṭabarī fails to mention this tradition.

64 'Fa-qāla ba'ḍuhum 'anā jalla jalāluhu bi-dhālika nafsahu, wa-huwa alladhī kāna fī'l-nār wa-kānat al-nār nūrahu ta'ālā dhikruhu fī qawl jamā'a min ahl al-ta'wīl' (al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, vol. 19, pp. 133–134).

65 al-Māturīdī, *Ta'wīlāt al-Qur'ān*, vol. 13, p. 358: 'Idḡarabat aqāwīl ahl al-ta'wīl fī hādhā. ṣarafa ba'ḍuhum ta'wīlahu ilā mā lā yazīduhu illā samāja wa-bu'dan 'an al-ḥaqq wa'l-ṣawāb wa-'aman.'

66 Q. 12:110, *When the messengers lost all hope and realised that they were lied to, Our help came to them, We saved whomever We pleased, but Our punishment will not be turned away from guilty people* (Abdel Haleem translation, modified).

67 al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, vol. 13, pp. 81–89.

68 Makkī b. Abī Ṭālib, *al-Hidāya ilā bulūgh al-nihāya*.

69 For references see Mourad, 'Towards a Reconstruction of the Mu'tazilī Tradition of Qur'anic Exegesis'.

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